

Washington, DC — Today, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) joined the authors of the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, Congressman Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Congressman Jim Ramstad (R-MN), at a press conference highlighting the need for mental health parity and to push for passage of the bill. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, and Congressman Rahm Emmanuel (D-IL), among others, also attended the press conference.

“Mental illness, including substance abuse, is one of the leading disabilities in America— about one in four adults suffer from diagnosable mental illness. Yet, two-thirds of those with mental illnesses do not receive any treatment or services for these diseases,” noted Joe. “Looking back throughout our history as a nation, we see that time and time again, we have had the courage, as a country, to look ourselves in the national mirror and to say ‘ we are better than this.’ Whether it was the fight for a woman’s right to vote, or the fight to end segregation and discrimination, we have had the strength at each of these moments to say that ‘this is not who we are; we are better than this.’”

To bring equity to the treatment of mental illness and substance abuse, Congressman Sestak has partnered with Congressman Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) to push for passage of H.R. 1424, the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, which expands the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996 to require group health plans that offer benefits for mental health and addiction to do so on the same terms as care for other diseases. The legislation closes the loopholes that allow plans to charge high copayments, coinsurance, deductibles, and maximum out-of-pocket limits and impose lower day and visit limits on mental health addiction care.

Contrary to how mental illness is typically thought of, the problem of untreated mental illness and addiction are not ones that we simply face as individuals, they are challenges we face as a country. An estimated 26.4 percent of Americans aged 18 and older – about one in four adults – suffer from mental illness. The price of not treating these individuals is enormous. Untreated mental illness costs our economy over \$150 billion a year. The Wall Street Journal has reported that untreated depression alone costs American businesses \$70 billion each year in lost productivity and absenteeism. All of this at a time when research has shown that 17 percent of service members returning from Iraq have experienced depression, anxiety, or PTSD, and for those who were affected, less than 40 percent have actually received mental health care treatment.

Joe recently held a forum on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Equity with Congressman

Kennedy at Elywn, which provides services for individuals with mental illness as well as developmental disorders. At the forum, Congressman Kennedy spoke of his own struggles with substance abuse and the importance of ensuring individuals get the treatment they need.

Congressman Sestak and Congressman Kennedy have also successfully offered two amendments to H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act, which will improve mental health care for our wounded soldiers. The first amendment highlights the fact that mental health care is an essential component to the medical services offered to our Veterans and the members of our Armed Services by clarifying that ‘medical care’ as defined in H.R. 1538 includes mental health care services. The second amendment requires the Secretary of the Department of Defense to develop a plan to help prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other stress-related psychopathologies (including substance abuse conditions) from developing in our military service members. In addition, it requires the Secretary to submit to Congress within 180 days a plan for establishing a Peer-Reviewed research program within the Defense Health Program’s research and development function to research the prevention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and how to best strengthen the psychological resiliency of our military service members. Both amendments passed with unanimous support.

“Left untreated, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can ultimately lead to other problems, including drug and alcohol abuse,” added Joe. “We can no longer afford to look at physical care and mental health care as two separate entities – with physical care as ‘legitimate’ and ‘mental health care’ as something less than that, and my amendments bring a much-needed spotlight on the problem.”

These amendments came out of a recent conversation Congressman Sestak had with a doctor at the VA Medical Center in Coatesville, PA who works with and treats veterans with PTSD. The doctor emphasized to Joe his concerns about the level of resources, attention, and the scope of care available to those who need mental health services. This is why, in addition to these two amendments, Congressman Sestak is also working on additional legislation addressing the funding of PTSD and quality reporting of medical care by DOD and the VA.

“Limiting access to good mental-health and addiction care is not just unfair, it’s unwise,” added Joe.

H.R. 1424, the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, has 265 cosponsors. It has been referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means, the Energy and Commerce

Committee, and the Education and Labor Committee, of which Joe is a member, for debate.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "DeepBlue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

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